

Subtle emotional process in early childhood pedagogy: evaluating the contribution of the Tavistock Observation Method

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Abstract

Nursery experience is now common for young children and their families. Questions of quality have focussed mainly on safety and early learning. The roles of subtle emotional processes in daily pedagogic interactions have received surprisingly little attention. This paper discusses the Tavistock Observation Method (TOM), a naturalistic method of observation underpinned by psychoanalytic conceptions and in which emotional experience is an integral part of observation narratives. The paper reports on a detailed evaluation of the use of an adapted version of TOM in nurseries in England and the contribution it can make to empirical exploration of emotional processes. A concurrent sister study will report on the use of A-TOM in Australia.

The paper concludes that A-TOM offers a complementary methodology to existing approaches by which the voices and experiences of babies, young children, and nursery staff can be considered in greater depth and with rigorous attention to subjectivity and social and cultural positioning. Issues in the implementation of the method are discussed.

Keywords: Emotion; Nursery; Pedagogy; Tavistock Observation Method; Subjectivity.

Introduction

Publicly regulated provision for young children is now widespread in industrialised countries (OECD 2012). In England, there are some 30,000 early years settings (excluding family day-care), double the number of primary schools (Ofsted 2015). Nurseries offering places for babies from three months opening 7.30 to 6.30 each day, all week for 51 weeks a year are not unusual (Elfer and Page 2015, 1770).

This expansion can be seen as enabling a transformation in mothers' access to paid employment (Ben-Galim 2014), a 'minor social revolution' (Brooker 2010, 194). However, it has not been without controversy. Karen (1998, 313) refers to 'infant care wars' to characterise the debates between those lobbying for child-care as a woman's right versus those promoting predominantly maternal care. Emotions can be intense in nursery policy as well as in the subtle processes of nursery life.

At least four broad theoretical approaches have been used to theorise emotion in social life. These four are attachment theory, approaches rooted in biological neuroscience, sociological approaches and particularly that of emotional labour, and psychoanalytic conceptions. These have enabled considerable advances in our understanding of nursery culture and organisation. However, this paper argues that a number of critical debates in early childhood pedagogy, concerning the daily experiences of babies and children, families and staff need to include attention to questions of subtle moment to moment emotional process. The paper proposes that the first three approaches above are not well suited to this whilst psychoanalytic conceptions have been applied to questions of nursery ethos and culture in only very limited ways. The paper discusses the Tavistock Observation Method (TOM) and its particular contribution to thinking about the unconscious communication of emotion in nursery interactions as an empirical approach that does give insight into these subtleties and should therefore be considered as a complementary methodology to existing work on emotion. TOM was first developed in 1948 for the training of child psychotherapists (Rustin 2009). Since then, its use has been extended to a much wider range of professionals. TOM has also been

adapted as a research tool in nursery contexts (Datler, Datler, and Funder 2010; Elfer 2012) and has been used as a pedagogic tool in nursery (Elfer and Dearnley 2007; Gallagher 2015). However so far, there has been no systematic evaluation of its use by nursery staff.

The evaluation reported here is one of two linked studies, arising from a joint planning meeting held in London between 6th and 10th September 2013 between two research teams, one based in Australia and one in England. The aim of this meeting was to develop two projects with a common approach but with flexibility for different national contexts, to further examine the use of TOM in nursery.

Following this introduction, the paper briefly reviews approaches to defining and theorising emotion in social interaction. Next, the Tavistock Observation Method (TOM), is introduced with attention to its underpinning psychoanalytic theory and critical issues. The paper then proposes the distinctive contribution that an adapted form of TOM (A-TOM) may make to exploring subtle nursery interactions. The methodology for the evaluation of A-TOM is described and the main findings given. Issues in the wider implementation of A-TOM in nurseries are discussed.

Defining and theorising emotion in social interaction

Bendelow and Williams have pointed to the long historical and philosophical tradition separating emotion from reason. They cite Reiff in naming this as the 'irrational passion for dispassionate rationality' (Reiff 1979, cited in Bendelow and Williams 1998, xii). In the last four decades, many writers working in the fields of neurobiology (Panksepp 2013, 89), developmental psychology (Trevathan 2005), Kleinian psychoanalysis (Rustin 2002, Froggett 2002, Shuttleworth 2002) and sociology (Bendelow and Williams 1998; Holland 2007), have written of the deeply limiting impact of that 'irrational passion' on understanding the role of emotion in social life. Holland concludes that:

...emotions are important in the production of knowledge....despite some unpleasant experiences, researchers value the extra power in understanding, analysis and interpretation, that the emotions they experience in the field can bring to the research. (2007, 208)

Rustin (2002, 199) highlights the arguments for combining the contributions of these different theoretical perspectives for example in psycho-social models (Froggett 2002; Clarke and Hoggett 2009; Elliott, Ryan, and Hollway 2012), bio-psycho-social models (Shuttleworth 2002) and developing understandings of the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983). This approach seems consistent with that offered by Burkitt

emotions are multi-dimensions and cannot be reduced to biology, relations or discourse alone, but belong to all these dimensions as they are constituted in on-going relational practices. As such, the objects of our study in the sociology of emotions cannot be understood as 'things' but are complexes composed of embodied, interdependent human existence. (1997, 42).

It is easy to imagine how these different conceptions of emotion may have embodied meaning for a nursery worker as she responds to the demands of many young children whilst regulating emotions of love and disgust, satisfaction and frustration, gratitude and resentment evoked by her employment (Toynbee, 2003).

In theorising social interaction in nursery, these different conceptual approaches have enabled considerable advances. Developmental psychology and specifically attachment theory has been deployed to address anxiety that nursery provision for the youngest children, separated

from family during the working day, may be harmful to young children's capacity to make future attachments. The importance of attachment interactions in nursery has become part of UK and much international early years policy (OECD 2012). Psychoanalytic approaches to emotion have been used to propose the concept of social defences, collective practices developed unconsciously, that seek to protect staff from close personal interaction with young children because of the painful emotions such interactions may evoke (Bain and Barnett 1986; Hopkins 1988). These insights hypothesise the challenges nursery staff may face in facilitating attachments with children.

Neuroscience has also been used to underpin the importance of attachment interactions in early years policy. Narvaez et al draw on higher measures of cortisol arising from children's anxiety and stress, and its link with synaptic damage in under threes in nursery to suggest that 'poor-quality daycare settings are often not able to cope with children's needs' (2013, 14). Here, 'poor-quality' is understood as meaning too few staff, low qualifications and high workforce turnover making consistent and responsive interaction difficult (Melhuish 2004).

Sociological understandings of emotion have drawn heavily on the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) to highlight the gendered and 'taken-for-granted' nature of much care work (Stonehouse 1989; Goldstein 1998; Taggart 2011; McDowall and Bayliss 2012). Osgood (2004), Colley (2006) and Taggart (2011) have used this concept to explore how emotion is deployed, regulated and valued in theorising nursery pedagogy.

My proposal is that the Tavistock Observation Method or TOM, as a psychoanalytically informed observation methodology, also has a contribution to make in theorising subtle emotional processes in nursery. I turn now to discuss TOM before describing its potential contribution.

The Tavistock Observation Method (TOM): Theory and critical issues

TOM was first established by Esther Bick in 1948 as part of the training of child psychotherapists in the Kleinian tradition. Bick is clear that she saw one purpose of the training as enabling students to *conceive vividly* the emotional experience of infants in ordinary early development. The student needs to feel:

...himself sufficiently inside the family to experience the emotional impact...But he must resist being drawn into roles involving intense infantile transference and therefore countertransference...He must not allow his behaviour to be dominated by these feelings which, on close scrutiny, will often be found to have been intensified by projections from members of the family. (1968, 558-559)

An aim of the observation experience, as well as learning about the emotions of the child, is for the student to learn about their own emotion processes, as these are evoked during the observation. The question arises therefore, in proposing an adaptation of TOM for use in nursery, whether a shift of focus from the learning an observer makes about herself to the learning a nursery staff member makes about the child is possible. I return to this in the first part of the discussion section of the paper.

In TOM, observers visit a family weekly for around one hour, at the same time and day each week over a period of one to two years. The observer does not take notes or have any recording device but seeks to immerse herself in the behaviours and experiences of the observed child. Freedom from having to contemporaneously translate observations into

written notes does seem to enhance the observer's capacity to be sensitive and receptive to the child's holistic experience. The observer has,

An intimate, one-to-one personal contact whose transactions are subjected to self-reflective thought of as meticulous a nature as possible. (Rustin 1989, 54)

The observation is written up in detail as soon as possible afterwards. What is unusual in the methodology is that the observer includes in the narrative a description of her feelings during the observation. Such feelings may include negative ones of anxiety, vulnerability or boredom as well as positive ones of joy, satisfaction or pride. Narratives are then read and discussed within a small, consistent 'scrutiny group' of observers familiar with the method and led by an experienced facilitator. I say more about this below. The underpinning theoretical conceptions have been elaborated elsewhere (Rustin 1989). Here, I highlight three primary sets of psychoanalytic conceptions, transference, counter transference and projection; anxiety and defence; and containment, all essential to the essence of TOM.

Transference, counter-transference and projection

Rustin (1989, 64) describes how emotion may be evoked in observers through their conscious effort to be sensitively receptive to the interplay of nuanced emotion and behaviour in interactions. He suggests for example that the observer may at times 'feel' identified (her counter-transference) with a parent, perhaps seeming to struggle to understand and manage the demands of her baby or young child. At other times, the observer may feel more identified with the child herself. Recent work has shown the enrichment of data possible through reflexive attention to these identifications (Elliot, Ryan, and Hollway 2012; Epstein, Fahey, and Kenway 2013).

The application of TOM in nurseries has enabled a number of theoretical and pedagogic advances (Elfer 2012). Yet Groarke (2008) has critiqued the empirical value of the method. He argues that an observer cannot explore possible meanings of emotion with those observed in the way a psychoanalyst can discuss possible meanings directly with a patient. Rustin rejects this critique arguing that although interpretations of observations cannot be tested with those observed, they are subject to rigorous examination within the 'scrutiny group' (2011, 158).

In Kleinian thinking, projection as a mode of communication is important too. Its function in earliest communications has been described by Waddell:

The baby initially relates to the world...via his experience of his mother...he is exquisitely sensitive to her moods. Her laugh will make him smile; her sadness will make him frown. When a baby is angry he is totally angry. With his whole being he perceives his mother as the source of his pain and anger. He feels bad. He wants to get rid of this feeling. He thrusts it back into its supposed source, namely his mother... (Waddell 1999, 213)

Understood as a form of a defence, a way of getting rid of feelings that are experienced as too painful to allow fully into the conscious mind, the power of projection as a source of observation data is considerable. I observed Graham, aged 15 months, who struggled at the end of his day in nursery, waiting to be collected:

Graham...came right up to me, just staring...I had a rather different impression of him, younger and more vulnerable....suddenly he lifts his arm as if to throw something or strike me...(Elfer 2006, 89)

The possibility of a literal projectile made me feel vulnerable. Was there an unconscious communication (projection) from him to express his own vulnerability having to endure the repeated excitement of the nursery door-bell and disappointment each time it was 'not for him'. Shortly afterwards, when taken to have his nappy changed, he collapsed into deep sobbing.

Anxiety and defence in individuals and organisations

Bain and Barnett's (1986) study of a London nursery revealed the intense stress experienced by staff caring for children, many of whom were in extreme social need and whose behaviour was disturbed. Bain and Barnett considered the children needed sensitive and individual attention from mainly one or two familiar workers. In practice, they observed interactions where any adult undertook any task (comforting, feeding, nappy changing, settling to sleep), for any child, at any time. They described this as 'multiple indiscriminate care' (1986, 14), conceptualising it as a social defence system within the culture of the nursery. They proposed that staff sought, not necessarily consciously, to avoid the disturbing demands of children by establishing a culture of 'social defence', prioritising practical and administrative tasks (1986, 14). Hopkins (1988) found similar patterns of behaviour in a separate nursery study.

An analysis of the functioning of social defences in a wide range of institutions, suggests how the psychological defences of an individual become:

...embedded and enforced within the structure, rules and cultures of institutions as routine assumptions and practices ... They are learned and adapted during the process of socialisation of new entrants to an institution... and are then passed on to their successors. (Armstrong and Rustin 2014, 14)

Early years policy has changed since the work of Bain and Barnett, with socially broad intakes of children and individual attachments prioritised (Page and Elfer 2013). Despite this, the emotional demands of working closely with young children can still be intense:

...we were obliged, repeatedly, to witness the experience of how hard and disturbing it is, to be confronted so intimately with the...often catastrophic emotions of very young children....From this point of view, the caregivers' indifferent and reserved behaviour can be understood as an expression of their desire to protect themselves from becoming overwhelmed... These defensive efforts are successful not least because they are embedded in a net of institutionalised defences...(Datler, Datler and Funder 2010, 82)

It is not only nurseries where social or 'institutional defences' operate. The Francis inquiry, for example, into the routine neglect of elderly patients in hospital, concluded that this could be explained as nurses' subconscious efforts to protect themselves from overwhelming human need (Francis 2013, para 20.37).

Containment

Through a systematic engagement with TOM, the observer develops a capacity to be sensitive to the detail of observed interactions, including emotional states, through her '*... intimate, one-to-one personal contact*' (Rustin 1989, 54). However, it is this intimate proximity that Datler et al report as difficult to maintain. How does TOM methodology assist the observer manage (contain) her own emotions so that she can remain attentive with less recourse to avoidance of painful aspects of interaction?

Containment occurs partly from support provided by the group of observers who meet regularly to discuss the observations – the ‘scrutiny group’. The aim of this group is to develop a critical but respectful dialogue, constructing possible meanings to the observation narrative, whilst sensitively attentive to observer subjectivity. This entails observers in considerable personal self-scrutiny. It is essential that the group can tolerate differences between group members if critical thinking is to be maintained and premature or pseudo consensus avoided.

Bion (1962) theorised containment as the development of thinking originating in the context of a baby’s relationship with the mother’s reverie, her capacity to be open and receptive to the baby’s communication of intense emotions:

We may deduce from reverie, as the psychological source of supply of the infant’s needs for love and understanding, what kind of psychological receptor organ is required if the infant is to be able to profit from reverie as it is able, thanks to the digestive capacities of the alimentary canal, to profit from the breast and the milk it supplies. (Bion 1962, 36)

‘Psychological receptor organ’ refers to the mother’s thinking mind and her capacity to tolerate the baby’s emotions (painful as well as pleasurable). It enables her to respond to this emotion, not as an implicit accusation by the baby of her failure to meet his needs (although at times it may feel like this), but rather applying her mind to reflecting on the baby’s experience. From a post-Kleinian perspective, the mother does this on behalf of the baby because the baby has no capacity yet to think about his own emotional experience and how it might be mediated. Bion’s conception of containment is that the baby can take in this response, profiting from the mother’s mind and how it has processed the baby’s experience, as the baby “profits from the breast”. As this experience is repeated countless times, it nurtures the young child’s own capacity to apply thinking to mental pain or frustration. Without this experience, the baby can only forcibly project the feelings away.

Emotional containment is part of the supervision process, that Bibby argues enables teachers to think about their contribution to, or withdrawal from, classroom interactions with pupils that are problematic:

...where a teacher ‘chooses’ to evade the pain and difficulty of emotional engagement with pupils, they block mental growth and learning in themselves as well as in their pupils making reflection and professional development problematic. (Bibby 2009, 53)

It is such emotional containment that is provided by the ‘scrutiny group’ in the TOM methodology, to facilitate critical attention to the observation narratives and the influence of observer subjectivity.

The distinctive contribution of TOM in exploring and illuminating subtle nursery interactions

There are a number of current debates in early childhood pedagogy that call for attention to the subtle moment to moment processes of intimate interactions. It is exploration of these fine grained, often fleeting and sometimes unconscious interactions, differentially experienced and influential according to individual subjectivities, that need adding to the broader theorising of emotion in nursery.

As Urwin has said in relation to these interactions in families:

...psychoanalytic infant observation... would be inappropriate, for example, in researching fine details of behavioural morphology, or where an argument about nature or frequency of interactions between adults and infants was to be based on precise numerical claims....But if one is interested in the subtleties of emotional processes in day-to-day family contexts, and in a methodology that allows for the exploration of emotional patterns over time, then its relative unobtrusiveness and framework of contextual regularity has considerable potential. (2007, 239)

I outline some of these debates, for which TOM may have *considerable potential*, below.

A first contested debate concerns the right of the child to a voice that is influential at all levels, in policy and daily pedagogy and how this is to be achieved. Clark has been at the forefront of methods of listening through her development of the 'mosaic method', focussing primarily on two, three and four year olds (Clark and Moss 2011). Research on listening to toddlers (12-24 months) and two-year-olds is growing, (see for example Licht et al 2008; Musattie and Mayer 2011; Rechia 2012; Kalliala 2014). Work on pedagogy with infants (under 12 months) is also developing (Harrison and Sumsion 2014) but has not yet addressed how we can also hear the voices of babies. Existing observation methodologies have achieved a lot, but they are not well designed to address the subtle communications of feeling evoked by babies in sensitively receptive observers and their possible meanings.

A second debate focusses on competing conceptions of the young child as either 'fragile' and in need of adult protection and control or as 'competent', having agency and the capacity for intentionality (Kalliala 2014). Kalliala emphasises the importance of both and illustrates this by reference to observations of two children (2014, 9); I say more about this in the 'Findings' section of this paper. Here, I only argue that expressions of 'fragility/competence' are subtle. Their apparent manifestations can easily represent their opposites. Laura (30 months), appeared strong and competent when hospitalised and separated from her parents. Her vulnerability, rage and despair, concealed by her at the time, only emerged in brief episodes of distress before she re-asserted rigid self-control (Robertson 1989, 32). The Robertsons relied on the emotional disturbance Laura's stoic expressions evoked, to challenge the widely desired reading of the video footage as showing Laura's competence and composure.

A third debate concerns the priority to be given to attachment interactions between children and nursery staff. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence contest the emphasis in early years policy on such attachments (2013, 86) arguing that they undermine children's freedom to develop peer interactions in friendships and groups. Graham, aged 15 months, appeared to have only marginal need of close adult attachment in the morning when he was fresh and engaged enthusiastically in peer interactions. However, in the afternoon, when he was tired, his demand for attention from his preferred staff member was intense (Elfer 2006, 89). The value and cost of nursery attachments may therefore vary between and within individual children and we need to understand this better.

There are debates too about the importance of nursery staff capacity to think about and manage the emotions their work evokes (Manning-Morton 2006). Colley (2006) has shown how working class trainee staff are taught to exhibit and conceal particular emotions as part of demonstrating the acquisition of a professional demeanour. Osgood (2004) has critiqued the denigration of emotion in nursery work, Taggart (2011, 87) has documented its 'taken for

granted' nature in training curricula and McDowall and Bayliss (2011) have shown the low status accorded to nursery staff working with children under three. The development of these critiques also require observation methodologies sensitive to subtle emotional process in nursery interactions, so that it has a legitimate and respected presence and can be discussed rather than hidden,

I suggest that our culture is not one that prioritises a focus on relationships and relationality....for as long as relationships remain unexamined or reduced to technical prescriptions....we will continue to have no way of observing or thinking about pedagogic relationships...(Bibby 2009, 43)

I want to acknowledge the great progress that has been made in the critical theorising of early childhood pedagogy, informed by observation methodologies already in effective use. However, the debates above call for greater attention to the role of subtle emotional process and complementary methodologies to observe them.

The Evaluation

Aims and research questions

The one to two year duration of TOM in its original form is unnecessary for its use as a pedagogic tool in nursery. TOM was therefore adapted (A-TOM) as a smaller number of observations (under five) and by observing each time for 30 minutes rather than 60. The aims of the research were to illustrate the detail and interpretative potential of A-TOM data and to evaluate whether A-TOM could be introduced and used in a way that nursery staff found ethical, manageable and helpful to their pedagogy.

Two main research questions were addressed:

1. How do Heads' evaluate the professional demands of introducing and using A-TOM in their nursery?
2. What are Heads' evaluations of the contribution of A-TOM to pedagogy in their nursery.

Study design and sample

The sample was chosen by identifying three case study sites that could be considered to be 'well-resourced' in terms of four criteria:

- local authority maintained nurseries (thus limiting the influence of commercial pressures);
- high inspection grading;
- stability of staffing (ie not involved in structural change or high workforce turnover);
- their heads / leaders having a reputation for professional authority and innovation.

The work was structured in three Phases:

Phase One: Three researchers and three Heads undertook a bespoke training of eight sessions of two and quarter hours each on the use of TOM, facilitated by a senior teacher of the method. Each researcher and Head undertook three observations in a nursery. They then compiled a written observation narrative, usually around 1000-1500 words, which was scrutinised and discussed by the team of six, with commentary from the teacher.

Phase Two: The team (the three researchers and the three Heads) met without the teacher to adapt TOM (A-TOM) for use in the Heads' own nurseries. A protocol for its implementation and a self administered Semi Structured Questionnaire (SSQ) were developed to provide a common framework for each nursery's evaluation.

Phase Three: The Heads introduced A-TOM to their staff and invited participation based on individual interest, the support of immediate colleagues, and individual workload. These staff, (four in N1; three in N2 and six in N3), then met as a group (the 'scrutiny group'), facilitated by their Head, to discuss the observations.

Data analysis

The data set included 18 observation narratives from Phase One, detailed notes of their discussion and the observations and detailed evaluation reports (the SSQ) from each nursery site.

Each SSQ was independently scrutinized by each researcher to identify data extracts (words, phrases or sentences) that that researcher considered related to the research questions, adding commentary or reflections on each extract. All three SSQs were then shared with the three researchers and the three Heads and further scrutinised to facilitate discussion and determination of a final set of data themes. A further meeting took place of the researchers and Heads to refine the main findings.

Ethical issues

A central concern was that A-TOM may be experienced by those observed, both children and parents, as a particularly intense observation process, even intrusive. The ethical balance we sought to strike was between seeing 'too much' (intrusive) and not seeing 'enough' (painful interaction avoided). We agreed that managing this balance with sensitivity needed to be judged during each observation with each observer alert to the impact of the observation, as it may be conveyed by those observed. I comment further on this in the findings. In addition, we ensured nursery staff and parents had detailed information about the nature of the observation process and time to reflect on this before being asked to individually consent to the A-TOM project.

The findings are organised in three sections. First, extracts of observation narrative from one set of observations in Phase One are given to illustrate the material. Second, Heads' evaluations of using A-TOM are given. Finally, Heads' evaluations of the contribution of A-TOM to their pedagogy are presented.

Findings 1: The Data Illustrated

Earlier, I referred to Kalliala's work (2011; 2014) concerning contested conceptions of the child as either 'fragile' or as 'competent'. She refers to Varpu, a toddler in a Finnish nursery, as '*a child of the outer circle*' to convey her view that Varpu '*falls outside the attention of adults*' (2014, 8):

Varpu ...walks slowly to nursery nurse Kirsi but does not say anything to her. When Kirsi starts to walk, Varpu follows her until she goes to the sandpit and takes two shovels and a plastic mould. She does not dig or make sand cakes however, as she watches what Kirsi is doing. Kirsi for her part does not seem to notice Varpu at all. (Kalliala 2014, 8)

Kalliala illustrates how passive Varpu seems and how often she meekly gives way in negotiations with other children, concluding,

Varpu is not a rare exception...Declaring Varpu and other children of the outer circle to be 'competent social actors' does not help. (2014, 11)

What might Kirsi say if she had been shown the observation? Did Kirsi see Varpu and decide not to make any intervention or did she, as Kalliala says, '*not seem to notice Varpu at all*'? Some children seem to have the capacity to be easily 'un-noticed' (Elfer and Dearnley 2007). Nobody sees all the children all of the time but are particular children capable of rendering themselves easy to overlook? Further, Kalliala (2014, 7) refers to observing interactions that are, '*both interesting, (seemingly) uninteresting and those we would not like to see at all*'. Are the latter interactions part of the problem of the un-acknowledged and therefore un-examined relationship that Bibby states stand in the way of a critical pedagogy (2009, 43)? Can A-TOM help reduce this risk?

I illustrate the contribution of A-TOM with extracts of weekly observations from the data set, of Libby, (13 months), her twin sister Amy and their brother Rex (36 months). These extracts show the fine grained nature of A-TOM data and the nuances of children's expressions of agency and vulnerability:

...Libby, in her buggy, is crying a tired cry but does not sound very distressed....it is quiet and calm and my mind wanders to a child where concerns have been expressed this morning. Libby looks very peaceful. She has a dummy in her mouth and every now and again, she starts to suck it more vigorously before her mouth relaxes again...her arms are close to the sides of her head her palms facing upwards, her fingers unclenched and curling into them clenching...

I continue to observe Libby as a practitioner starts to quickly tidy the room. It is hard not to get up and help and I feel worried that I must seem lazy for continuing to watch a sleeping baby while a colleague is so busy.

...there is a sudden loud noise and Libby startles in her sleep, her arms and legs first jerk upwards...Her eyes open and she cries out. Just as she takes a deep breath to cry again, a practitioner immediately puts Libby's dummy back in and rocks the buggy saying 'shh, shh, shh', placing a blanket across Libby with one corner close to her hand and face. Libby twists the blanket in her hand and snuggles her face into it. I wonder whether it is a reminder of the familiarity of home. She gradually seems to relax with the rhythmic rocking of the buggy...she starts to close her eyes, sucking hard on the dummy. Another practitioner says she thinks Libby is going to sleep again but Libby's eyes open, stretches her legs and arms and the practitioner lifts her up, holding her close to her body in a cuddle. Libby's face crumples and she looks as if she is going to cry. The practitioner says 'oh no, don't cry, don't cry baby' and starts to rock and sway...she gives Libby her dummy and Libby sucks on it still looking sad...she starts to cry again

The extracts suggest Libby's vulnerability and her struggle to manage even with the close attention of staff and comforters in the form of dummy and blanket. They also show the struggle of the observer to maintain attention, distracted first by concerns regarding another child and then by feelings of guilt at continuing to observe, rather than help colleagues, when Libby is sleeping.

The picture of Libby however is transformed when her brother arrives announcing:

‘Libby’s awake!’ . Libby’s face lights up and she smiles and vocalises towards Rex. Rex puts his arm round her. She leans in towards him and almost topples over as he cuddles her into him. Libby is smiling and vocalising and seems to have come alive.

In the second observation, as Libby, Amy and Rex arrive with their mother, the observer again records her feelings of discomfort and anxiety:

I feel uncomfortable, perhaps because I don’t want to be too intrusive whilst the mother settles her children...she puts Amy down on the mat before immediately going to settle Rex...Libby follows her Mum with her eyes and I feel slightly anxious...

As the mother leaves:

Libby watches her and looks worried. She looks at me and I smile. Libby’s expression remains serious as she looks back at me several times. It is very intense and I blink as Libby continues to watch me intently. I blink again and Libby looks more curious. I blink a third time and then Libby blinks too. I blink again and Libby smiles and curls into herself before looking back again. I realise that I have broken the observer position and resolve to try harder.

These blinks might be understood as a version of peekaboo in which both Libby and the observer disappear momentarily from each other’s view, in order to have the joy of regaining the reassuring visual connection. The observer’s ‘blink’ response seems finely attuned to Libby and yet she berates herself for not maintaining her ‘observer position’. The desire to soothe Libby’s ‘worry’, breaking her ‘observer position’, suggests that vulnerability is painful to observe.

In the third observation, Libby is being held in a standing position:

I am surprised at how strong Libby is, it is as though she has transformed from a tiny vulnerable and dependent baby lying down to a strong independent toddler within a few seconds...

Later:

...another practitioner tries to lean Libby back to enable her to sit down but Libby would not bend in the middle and so remained standing. The practitioner comments that she loves to stand; another comments that Libby is like an ironing board...Libby bounces up and down and vocalises ‘da, da, da’it feels quite joyful with much more energy than before.

The reference to ‘like an ironing board’, a lifeless flat surface, also seems to miss the significance of Libby’s standing as exercising and celebrating her agency and autonomy with feeling.

These observation extracts, in contrast to the one of Varpu above, show how much these staff interact with Libby. Varpu’s observations revealed later her engagement in group singing. However, this did not seem to be recognised as significant by the staff. Once again, it is important to ask why this is not noticed. Is it because the staff are operating to the paradigm of the competent child and therefore do not want to ‘interfere’ but always to leave the initiative to the child? Or is that the emotional work of maintaining thoughtful attention to

passivity or vulnerability in children is difficult? We cannot know in Varpu's case. However Libby's observations suggest the value of A-TOM, not only in documenting the nuances of individual children's competency *and* fragility, but also the emotion work of observing these states with sufficient receptivity.

Findings 2: Heads' evaluations of the professional demands of introducing and using an adapted form of TOM within their setting

First, A-TOM is time intensive. The time commitment for each nursery included releasing staff to undertake three to five observations, of 30 months duration, at weekly intervals, time to write these up, and weekly time for their scrutiny and discussion (60 minutes).

Second, observing with A-TOM evoked unexpected emotions for the observers. There were feelings of excitement to be able to focus on the 'whole child' rather than on narrow learning outcomes. There was also anxiety about what observers may see (for example poor practice and how this would be discussed once seen) and about the discussion of emotions evoked:

....a concern if not all staff shared their feelings, how that might be seen within a professional forum...one practitioner offered the example 'what if I am angry about something I observed, would others think I was not being very professional...'.
(Head-N2)

Third, the observer must find a balance between maintaining some 'distance' in order to be able to concentrate on observations and not becoming so 'distant' that a child feels ignored or rebuffed:

I felt really uncomfortable observing so closely when he obviously knew I was looking at him. (Practitioner-N2)

This contrasts, (see data reported below), with staff reports that children appeared to respond to such attentive observation with pleasure and that it could serve as a valuable resource for them.

Fourth, the Heads facilitating the observation scrutiny group considered it helped their staff have a more rounded view of children. However, they spoke too of their struggle to maintain a critical and questioning approach. It seemed easy for groups to resort to quick agreement on the meanings of the observations, possibly relying on prior knowledge of the child and perhaps as a more comfortable 'group position' to one of disagreement:

Facilitating the discussions required care: valuing contributions, valuing silence or time to ponder, encouraging practitioners to be specific and not over generalise, bringing in new ideas to help practitioners think differently...As centre leader, I don't think I inhibited discussion but I think the dynamic would have been different with another grouping. (Head-N1)

Findings 3: Heads' evaluations of the contribution of A-TOM to pedagogy in their nursery

A-TOM did appear to strengthen the capacity of observers to see and think about interactions where the child evoked concern or discomfort in the observer, as well as those where the child communicated joy or satisfaction:

It also became apparent that the depth of understanding gained from discussing the observations deeply would be beneficial for those children that are causing some concern without a clear reason. (Head-N2)

She keeps looking over at B, who is helping the children to dry the babies. I really want to ask her if she wants to dry her baby as I feel she is looking to an adult to support her to move on...I really want to help her at this point as she repeats the same unsuccessful movements over and over again and I feel really frustrated for her. (Practitioner-N3)

A-TOM also appeared to enable children, who previously had been overlooked or described as 'invisible', to be thought about:

It made me aware that S was an 'invisible' child; she looked to others to support her and waited for this to happen. She was overlooked because other children were more proactive when it came to asking for attention. (Head-N3)

Some children experienced being observed so closely as a valuable resource that raised their spirit and involvement:

...children seemed to enjoy being held in mind by the observer especially for one little boy...he had seemed to be on the periphery of the group during the observation but from the report of the practitioners who observed him, he appeared to increasingly gain confidence through being observed, taking on a playful quality. He notices I am observing and opens the door of the fridge. He looks underneath the door to me and smiles. He looks through the hinge. He turns back to do something in the fridge and looks through the hinge again and smiles. (Practitioner-N3)

The emotion in observations appeared to influence the emotional tone of their discussion:

I was very aware of how the emotional response of the observer then had a direct impact on the ensuing discussion. One observer was very taken with what she perceived as the mischievous and characterful behaviour of the child she was observing. She chuckled and giggled when recalling the child. Her animated response was infectious and the ensuing discussion was markedly upbeat....Another practitioner found the low energy and repetitive solitary play that she observed had an impact on her own energy levels and she had found it difficult to concentrate. On this occasion I found it harder to facilitate the ensuing group discussion which felt like it too lacked energy. (Head-N1)

...the discussions were something new for the staff team and I found it difficult to cut them off as time ticked on- there was a sense of excitement about the way children were being spoken about that I haven't heard in our usual planning meetings. (Head-N3)

Heads reported staff noticing peer interactions previously not seen:

...without clipboard and pen, you are able to see so much more...I really didn't know that he was so skilled at negotiating between his friends, I thought he was the follower. (Practitioner-N2)

Some of the participants were surprised at how the younger two-year-olds related to one another and made their own conscious choices. (Head-N3)

Discussion

The adaptation of TOM for use in nursery raises a number of issues.

TOM was developed as part of the training of child psychotherapists. A primary aim was for the student to learn about their own emotional responses as these were evoked during the observation. By contrast, the primary aim of A-TOM is to assist nursery staff think about children's interactions and experiences by including attention to the significance of subtle emotion. There is thus a shift of pedagogic focus from the learning of the observer to learning about the child. However a central principle of the methodology, whether in its original or adapted form, remains the subjectivity of the observer and scrutiny of the part it has played in the construction of the observation narrative and its discussion.

Is TOM an observation methodology that can be extended for use by professional groups who are not trained in psychoanalytic theory and do not have access to psychoanalytically informed support? Such extensions, beyond the field of clinical psychoanalysis, have been a rich part of the evolution of TOM (Rustin 2009). Thinking about how a child can 'make you feel' does not seem to need a detailed understanding of projection or counter-transference. Yet there are practical implications for the use of A-TOM in nursery. One is that children expect nursery staff to interact so that adopting 'observer distance' raises ethical issues. Another issue is that scrutiny of the observations requires a considerable degree of self-scrutiny in the presence of colleagues. A further issue concerns how this type of observations can be shared with parents. Each of these is discussed below.

Observer distance

Nursery staff expressed concern that the change in their stance from a responsive interacting adult to one who was observing with some distance even for relatively short periods, may be disconcerting for the child. This concern was only partly born out. There were references in the evaluations to one or two children reacting with uncertainty. Children are mainly familiar with staff observing but the staff member usually has at least a notebook to signal this to children. Our commitment as a team was that a sensitive and respectful response to the baby or child always took priority over maintaining the observation. This was judged by each observer as the observation progressed and discussed afterwards within the scrutiny group. The issue does however need sensitive consideration in settings considering the use of A-TOM. Neither a familiar, nor a new observer can observe with complete detachment. Finding and adjusting 'position', both physical and relational, is an ethical imperative, but overall, staff reported that this had been manageable.

Facilitating the Scrutiny Group and managing anxiety

A-TOM observations entail seeing what may be painful to see as Kalliala's work suggested. Scrutinising observation is also personally demanding. The observer is exposing the quality of her descriptive writing, including her emotional responses, to close colleagues. The more honest and detailed she is in her account, the more likely she is to have to engage with what may be uncomfortable or painful. For the three members of the research team, presenting and discussing our observations in Phase One of the research, seemed unproblematic in prospect. In reality, we each experienced anxiety about the adequacy of our observations, about our descriptive detail and interpretative capacity. The challenge for the nursery staff is in some respects greater. Their observation narratives are not only discussed by colleagues but may include written detail about them. The issue of managing the scrutiny group in a nursery with sensitivity is therefore a critical one.

In the original Tavistock observation method, observers have the support of scrutiny group colleagues and may also have individual personal analysis. Rustin argues that in relation to

the use of A-TOM in different professional contexts, further individual support, beyond the scrutiny group, may be necessary through supervision and mentoring (Rustin 2009, 32). There is no doubt that the depth of reflexive scrutiny involved in A-TOM may entail painful emotion. As Bibby has argued (see above), if this reflexive scrutiny by professionals is routinely avoided, emotion as a major dimension of pedagogic interaction remains unexamined. The ethical and reflexive question is therefore whether it is better that the emotional labour of staff remains largely unexamined and unsupported or whether it can be attended to within a supportive and well contained professional scrutiny group. In this research, the Heads were careful to invite staff to participate who they thought would value and manage A-TOM. They accepted that not all staff may wish to work in this way. We asked the Heads some three months after the A-TOM observations had been completed whether, on reflection, they had any concerns about the impact of the process on their staff who observed. They were reassuring in their responses.

Nevertheless, the Heads found facilitating the scrutiny groups challenging. Achieving rigorous but sensitive discussion of what had been observed whilst avoiding individual staff feeling unduly exposed or criticised is not easy. They also had to balance maintaining some agreed practices whilst facilitating new ways of thinking about others. Lindahl describes this as:

...about daring to trust, trying to be secure in the uncertainty, and daring to be open when facing the unknown; this is a basis for being able to meet the other as 'absolutely new' ... (Lindahl 2015, 65)

The Heads appeared to carry out the role with skill given the depth of thinking about individual children they reported. Nevertheless, it may be important to explore models of training to facilitate scrutiny group discussion that are sensitive to group processes and the delicate balances required.

Involving parents

A further issue concerns how parents are included in these observations. The aim of the observations is to help staff know, think about and understand children better. They are raw accounts and in this respect, are written versions of the immediate observations and reactions that staff may note as they work. To be of value, narratives need to avoid editing out descriptions of children's behaviours that parents may find upsetting in their raw form. They also need to avoid editing out practices within the setting that need to be thought about by staff but would not be appropriate to show parents. For these reasons, observation narratives are not shown to parents. However, parents must not be completely excluded. Observations, in a developed form, should contribute to a richer and more holistic basis for discussion with parents about their child with the child's voice as prominent in these discussions.

A-TOM and its contribution to addressing complexity and uncertainty in early childhood pedagogy

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence have critiqued notions of 'quality' in early childhood pedagogy that rely on external experts and simple measurable certainties (2013, 97). The nursery staff in this study have shown their commitment to a different approach to that of 'simple certainties'. They were ready to become 'less certain' and prepared to express in writing some of the emotions evoked by their observations.

There is a turn in the early childhood literature to consider emotion in early childhood pedagogy. Can A-TOM make a contribution to the empirical exploration of emotion in daily interactions? A-TOM is much shorter in duration than the original form of the method. Further, it does not rely on an explicit psychoanalytic interpretative framework. Is it an adaption too far or does it retain enough of the essence and power of the original method? The view of the experienced Tavistock Observation Method teacher in Phase One of the research was that the adapted method retained its pedagogic richness. Further, the nursery staff participating in the research expressed pleasure and relief that their emotions were seen as a legitimate part of their daily professional experience and could be thoughtfully considered. This enabled the scrutiny and discussion they needed, rather than leaving them in the shadows, present and influential, but out of reach of critical attention.

However, even the adapted form of the method is time consuming. The settings managed to find the time needed but it was clearly not easy. It is not only a question of time but also achieving an essential atmosphere of patient, detailed reflection when the general culture is one of rush and clock watching. Here the concept of the 'competent system' (Urban et al. 2012) is useful. Achieving depth in professional reflection and avoiding resort to 'simple certainties', relies on systems and working cultures that value this and can facilitate it.

The findings above add strength to the case for seeing A-TOM as an essential tool in the exploration of complexity and uncertainty in current debates in early childhood pedagogy in a way that is rooted in culture and individual subjectivity. These findings are in keeping with those emerging from the sister study to this one (Harrison 2015) which has used A-TOM to develop the theorisation of belonging in early childhood pedagogy.

Conclusion

There is a strong sense of the commitment within early childhood pedagogy to balance the growing demands of policy makers for positivist forms of research, that provide 'certainty' and an unambiguous way of identifying policy priorities, with a different approach. This different approach has been set out most clearly in the work of Peter Moss and his colleagues (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013; Moss 2015). It is an approach that is democratic in its inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives, including the voices of babies and young children. It is attentive to the influence of practitioner subjectivity, is resistant to single truths and certainties and demonstrates a capacity to tolerate uncertainty and the anxiety this can provoke.

A-TOM offers a distinctive methodology in helping to take that approach forward. Its contribution as both a research and pedagogic tool in early childhood contexts has been documented in the literature. What has been missing in the literature is any discussion of how A-TOM data may underpin professional reflection that includes attention to emotional processes. The research reported here addresses that gap. This evaluation, complemented by the findings emerging from its sister study in Australia, and added to the work on A-TOM already reported in the literature, provides enough of a basis now for its wider adoption and development in early childhood contexts. With its distinctive attention to emotion and subjectivity as part of the observation data, it can assist us give serious attention to the subtle interactive processes of early childhood pedagogy.

Geertz argues that:

... whatever accurate, or half-accurate sense one gets of what one's informants are 'really like'... comes from the ability to construe their modes of expression, what I would call their symbolic systems (Geertz 1975, 53)

The 'mode of expression' of a baby or young child, that we have to engage with if we are serious about listening to their voice, is an unconscious as well as a conscious mode. Despite Groarke's critique of the validity of understandings of unconscious communications outside of the consulting room, the opportunity to complement and triangulate the findings of different observation methodologies in early childhood pedagogy with those of A-TOM should not be neglected.

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